The Bologna Process and the former Soviet Union

by Sophia Howlett[1]

The higher education future of the new/old Europe has a set of relatively clear goals. These can be summarised as the establishment of an EHEA (European Higher Education Area) and an ERA (European Research Area). The EHEA, with which this study is mainly concerned, is being implemented through the Bologna Process – so called for the city where this Process was 'confirmed', but also naturally not lacking in symbolic value as the cradle of European higher education. The timeline for the EHEA is fairly clear, movement in the early signatory countries has been gathering pace. Even many of the 'hows' have been formulated with space for steady discussion on new elements as problems arise. From early on it has also been clear to some that the EHEA should not simply be a technical arrangement, or a trade agreement, but an ideological commitment that should fundamentally orient national systems to a European identity. Despite this radicalised context, so far the Bologna Process appears to be the largest and most successful reform of higher education ever undertaken in the European region. So much so that the EHEA concept has widened geographically with each new phase in the process as countries line up to sign on.

Desire not to be too precipitate or hegemonic is an early part of the discourse surrounding Bologna. However, as the process has moved on, core supra-national bodies have, understandably, succumbed to these centralising tendencies by talking of the 'Bologna consensus'. For these bodies, invested as they are in moving towards cohesion, the process is well underway and a 'consensus' is desirable and seemingly obvious in many areas. For instance, 3+2 is already a 'norm' in Trends IV. The trend in Trends is clearly from highly generalized agreements to specific principles.

But what remains of this explicit cohesion on closer view? And what effect would ambivalence, lack of cohesion or even individual re-structuring of a general principle have upon the central goal? My interest here is first then in the nature of this enterprise for those newly joined or seeking to join. For these countries, my questions are especially pertinent – what is it to which they have committed? And how far does their commitment extend? Secondly, those at the heart of the Process might ask the same questions of their new or proposed members. In attempting to maintain a spirit of integration and cohesion, how far can or should the involvement of a new set of countries at this juncture affect the emerging central character of the EHEA?

Is it revealing, for instance, that certain new territories undermine the notion of consensus discussed in Trends IV, and that these are the very places that Trends IV chose not to review as too recent additions to the Process or due to lack of time? I am not suggesting dark agendas here, but it is possible that in the desire to move quickly to a seemingly united 'bottom line', there arises the potential to see what fits, rather than what does not. It may also be true that in taking in countries with a formerly strong higher education identity that these countries may not want to 'fit' into a consensus – may have something to add to what is supposed to be a *process*. Such a desire to see unity and progress (the ideals of modernity) is understandable, especially given the present internal difficulties of the EU (Bologna as another locus of pro-Europe EU ideologues?). Why be concerned about potential lacunae, misapprehensions, difficulties, especially at the local levels? It would make so much sense to 'lead' the minority to Consensus, especially when so many appear now to agree. Variations at this juncture should perhaps either accommodate to the majority or be left behind. And if countries have joined not fully understanding the implications as envisaged from some centre, then this is a national problem to be worked out internally as the country moves further into the process.

[1] Sophia Howlett is an International Policy Fellow for 2005-06, more details of her research can be found at http://www.policy.hu/howlett/index.html

These questions and pressures may have been present at each signing phase, but in 2003 Russia joined. From a policy perspective, the desire to unify and encourage newcomers to conform is understandable especially if one looks from the West to the new Bologna signatories as isolated patchwork pieces on the map who have now joined an EHEA. But the new territories are neither peripheries nor isolated newcomers. From 2003 onwards, the process did not simply involve voluntary refugees from the former Soviet system, but the remnants of the Soviet system itself. Increasingly, the process includes countries who were or are part of a greater whole – an 'unsaid' in the EHEA map. And this greater whole, the former Soviet space, was and is an area of strong and deep academic traditions. To be more radical, the EHEA has taken on parts of its effective predecessor – what one could term the SHEA (Soviet Higher Education Area). The tendrils of this SHEA spreading far beyond the Soviet territory in a manner the EHEA will inevitably wish to emulate: education as trade and imperial consolidation, as usual.[2] Meanwhile, there are those even further hidden on a supposed periphery – not fitting within a present concept of Europe and yet very much tied to present signatories.

So what story am I telling here? When the old Europe meets the other Europe of Eurasia at the system level, then mutual recognition, understanding, is hard. Ignorance is the most obvious problem, especially when the benefits of understanding are not always obvious to either side. But ambivalence too is endemic, even concerning the foundations (is the other Europe really European?). And a desire for compromise may be rare.

The difficulties in bringing together these two Europes are not new. And whilst the story of a fledgling EHEA meeting a declining SHEA is beguiling, it is only part of a more complex narrative. Indeed, just as the 'consensus' and the work of supra-nationals in Europe may be leaving aside deviations, ambivalences etc which could give us a more genuine sense of the process, so the SHEA may hide as much as it reveals. Further, for instance, the determination of a country like Russia to maintain certain elements of its system may not be so different from the desires of other, non-fSU countries. The specific goals of Bologna are, after all, highly ambivalent - a heady and somewhat still disputed mix of human capital theory and the social dimension. Is Lifelong Learning the path to individual fulfillment within a supportive educational framework built through genuine social partnership? Or is it a cynical attempt to offload multi and supranational companies' training costs onto the individual, and at the same time persuading that individual they are to blame if the transnational changes its mind and moves to a cheaper location? Is the new quality control culture an attempt to make degree programmes of higher quality than before (assuming there was such a quality deficit) whilst more available to all, or a new means for government intervention at a radical level pushing for a quality discourse based on cost per unit? And if the central ideological tone of Bologna has not been embraced by the whole of Ukraine, for example, then perhaps others also feel uncertain of the value of European identity as a central feature of European Higher Education. On the other 'side', the seeming nostalgic monolith of a Soviet quality education covers the problems of research in the universities and of a former over-emphasis on ideology in the social sciences which stunted innovation, to give but a few examples of the problems past and present in fSU higher education.

This envisaged policy study most emphatically does not wish simply to re-enforce the stories we have already told ourselves nor to apply some readily accepted theory. In otherwords, I do not want to universalise per se in order to create easy policy advice, but to allow the complexity of the relationships, the individual cases, and the ambivalences inherent in present policy choices to emerge. I do not want, for instance, to re-cast new fSU cases as a periphery or borderland. There are many peripheries here, but in the case of Bologna, the fSU should not be characterized as periphery (an easy discourse with which to disregard new signatories), and certainly we should not encourage the creation of a Bologna borderland between old/new Europe and the fSU. We can envisage a reading of the near future where Russia et al would be seen as a border between those who are 'in' and those who remain outside, but there are already perhaps so many borderlands in Europe (whether old or new) as to make the category less than useful in the Bologna context. I do not want to embark on an analysis of fSU concerns in the light of such a thing as 'Post-Communism', nor post-colonialism meets new colonialism, in which some fSU countries possess a sub-alterity caught between the old empire and the new accountants of human capital. These approaches are too universalising (and so alluring) to be wholly honest here.

[2] The normal comparison here would be between the EHEA and the US. It is certainly true that the US approach to higher education is being emulated in many aspects by the Bologna Process, and the US use of higher education for foreign policy ends and for trade is certainly similar, and yet the SHEA shares at least equally, and has more traditionally in common with many of the European systems, plus is the former (present?) block that the EHEA is attempting to swallow piecemeal.

In providing a study that seeks to examine present changes in higher education in Europe with an emphasis on the fSU, I hope to move beyond the large pre-existing theoretical approaches. Effectively, I will produce a pilot study of a broad geographical scope that indicates attitudes at a local level whilst attempting also to convey some of the complexities of the debate around higher education concepts used in Bologna. The aim is first to provide insights useful to policy making on all sides in pursuing relations and forming the next stage of the EHEA, whilst raising as many questions as possible for future more in-depth analysis - in otherwords, to raise complexity and difference rather than hide them. In doing so, I may also be able to consider or re-theorise this relationship in higher education between ideological forces battling within the European arena.